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The Valour and the Horror Controversy and the Official History of the RCAF, Volume 3

David Bercuson and Syd Wise

The publication of Volume 3 of the *Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force* by Brereton Greenhous, Stephen J. Harris, William C. Johnston and William G.P. Rawling, (University of Toronto Press, 1994) reawakened the media controversy over *The Valour and the Horror*, particularly that related to the "Death by Moonlight" episode. Although there are certain similarities in approach between the Official History and the film, some of them superficial and some of them not, the differences are far more significant than the similarities. Volume 3 is in fact a comprehensive and well-documented history of the RCAF's overseas operations in the Second World War; the RCAF's role in the bombing offensive occupies 344 of 909 pages of text. Though much of this section is taken up with the origins and history of No.6 (RCAF) Group, the authors also examine the origins of the RAF's bombing philosophy in the 1919-1939 period, and trace the evolution and execution of RAF bombing policy during the war.

The merits of this volume of the RCAF history were not what caught the attention of the media (which, by contrast, had all but ignored the first two volumes of the history). Rather, it was because the authors appeared to be arguing that Sir Arthur Harris' accession to the leadership of Bomber Command in 1942 that brought a decided shift to "area" bombing aimed at destroying German morale by killing, wounding and "de-housing" as many German city dwellers as possible, especially in industrial cities. Such a

conjuncture was precisely the argument of *The Valour and the Horror*. Unlike the film, however, the authors of Volume 3 show that the decision to stress area bombing was a decision of higher command, including the British War Cabinet, and that it came about because of several factors, including long-held theories about the potential impact of bombing upon enemy morale; the inability of the RAF to make precision attacks at night; the strongly-held desire of the British (and Canadians, if poll results presented in the book are a valid measure) to pay the Germans back for their own area bombing of London, Coventry and other centres; and the powerful necessity of making some important contribution to the war in the west while the forces of the Soviet Union were fighting and dying in large numbers in the east. In short, while the official history offers a complex—and surely valid—explanation of the onset of area bombing, *The Valour and the Horror* did not, preferring to account for the strategy in its depiction of the devil-figure Arthur Harris.

Yet there is a sense in which the two accounts of the bomber offensive coincide. Both Volume 3 of the official history and "Death by Moonlight" elaborate a common central point: that British and Canadian aircrew were deliberately sent out, night after night, to kill innocent Germans, with little benefit to the war effort. At its crudest, the argument of both is that the RAF and RCAF killed Germans just for the sake of killing Germans. The impact of this contention is perhaps stronger in Volume 3 of the official

history because it is, after all, an elaborately researched and documented official history. The melancholy conclusion its team of authors reach in assessing the bombing role is that "the Combined Bomber Offensive (by both the RAF/RCAF and the United States Army Air Force) against Germany did not begin to meet its objectives—the progressive, if not sudden, decline in enemy war production and, later, civilian morale—until the last months of 1944, four full years after it began in earnest." (pp.865-867)

It should be noted that although the authors assert in the sentence quoted here that the strategic bombing offensive began in 1940, it was 1942 that was the true beginning of the offensive, according to the authors themselves. It was this contention—the combination of frightfulness and pointless sacrifice—that attracted the media, and appeared to offer vindication for the position taken by the McKennas in *The Valour and the Horror*.

We believe it is precisely here that Volume 3 of the official history is most open to criticism. But before taking up that point we should state that this book has many real strengths. It is well written and almost invariably interesting. Divided into sections on Air Policy, The Fighter War, The Maritime Air War, The Bomber War, and Air Transport, it gives a remarkably complete overview of the massive and varied Canadian air effort in overseas theatres during the Second World War. The Bomber War section is especially valuable for the technical detail it supplies on bombing operations, aircraft and the course of actual missions. An outstanding merit of this section is the analysis of the war of electronic measures and counter-measures, a major feature of the night-bombing campaign. The description of this aspect of the bomber war is probably the best short account that has appeared in print.

Yet there are problems with Volume 3 of the official history, particularly in its treatment of the strategic bombing offensive. The authors are almost obsessively concerned to establish that Harris' sole aim in the offensive was to destroy German cities and

kill German civilians. But this is contested by no credible historian; it has long been well-established that the German population and the morale of the German people were prime targets of Bomber Command. The real puzzle was why the air staff believed so firmly in the fragility of civilian morale, yet this question is never raised in Volume 3 of the official history. (The roots of this belief are to be found in the RAF staff in 1917-1918, and may in part be connected with an upper class perception of the emotional volatility of the industrial working classes—a mistaken assumption if there ever was one.)

The assault on German civilians and their morale was by no means the only endeavour engaged in by Bomber Command, which in fact waged a multifaceted campaign against industrial targets, rail and communications systems, aircraft manufacturing plants and other war material industries, oil refineries, and so on. All this is carefully detailed in Volume 3 of the official history, at the same time as the authorial team condemns Harris for being so single-minded about area bombing. Sometimes Harris selected targets other than cities of his own volition; sometimes at the suggestion of his seniors, such as Portal and Eisenhower. This contradiction, which runs through the bombing section of Volume 3, suggests that the authors took literally Harris' bombastic rhetoric, as in his letter to the Undersecretary of State for Air of 25 October 1943 in which he declared that the aim of RAF bombing was, quite simply, "the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers and the disruption of civilised community life throughout Germany." (pp.724-25) If Harris was so rigidly committed to these objectives, as the authors believe, then why the varied missions mounted by Bomber Command?

The likely answer is that Harris shared the inconsistencies which overtake all of us, including senior commanders. He made compromises, he was susceptible to pressures from others, and occasionally he changed his mind or was ready to try new approaches. Moreover, Harris was not Bomber Command, only its Air Officer Commanding in Chief. Volume 3 of the official history reduces

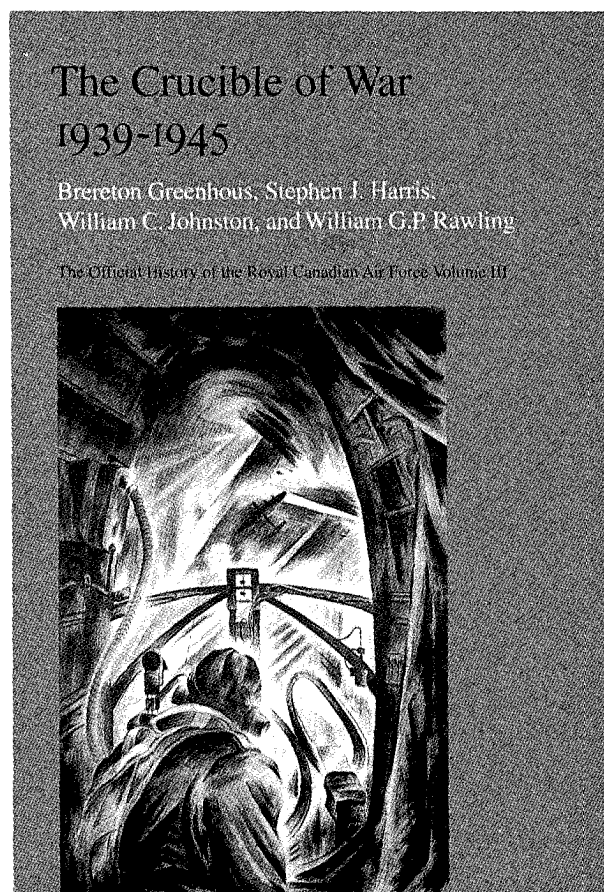
Bomber Command to a one-man show. It is to be regretted that the kind of sophisticated analysis of the many factors making up American bombing policy (and its many contradictions) to be found in Conrad C. Crane's *Bombs, Cities and Civilians: American Airpower Strategy in World War II* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993) are missing in this volume.

In another respect the approach taken by the authors of this volume of the official history intersects with that of the producers of *The Valour and the Horror*. Both conclude that the bomber offensive did not achieve the objectives of its proponents. In two or three paragraphs tacked on to the end of the Bomber War section, a series of considerations are listed which attest to the importance of the bombing offensive, whether as establishing a "Second Front" when no other means was available to do so diverting substantial German manpower and war material to air defence at the cost of German armies in the field. But given the weight of the narrative, these paragraphs are perfunctory and appear almost as afterthoughts.

What grounds do the authors have for their conclusions about the effectiveness of the Combined Bomber Offensive? There is no scholarly assessment of the United States share of that offensive, nor is there any discussion of the differing views that exist on the overall offensive. Nearly half a century after the compilation of the British and American strategic bombing surveys, the authors of Volume 3 accepted the view of some authorities on the meaning of that body of evidence—authorities well known for the opinion that the campaign was a failure—and ignore the evidence brought forward by other authorities of a different view. Neither Williamson Murray nor Richard Overy, for example, are cited, yet their research pointed to the conclusion that the RAF offensive had a significant impact on the course of the war. There is, in sum, a remarkable contrast between the quality of analysis made by the authors on bombing operations and German defensive measures, and the lack of analysis in assessing the value of the campaign of which these operations were a part. The jury

is still out on the actual impact of the bombing offensive upon Germany and on the outcome of the war itself; it cannot be said that Volume 3 of the official history has contributed much to the matter.

It would be hard to say whether the stance taken by the authors on the bombing offensive derives in part from a moral revulsion against the form that offensive took. At one point (p.843) the authors refer to the "moral ambiguity" of area bombing against German cities, but nowhere in their section on the Bomber War is there either a moral or legal discussion of the issues raised by an air war levied against civilian populations. Scot Robertson, in his essay on the strategic bombing offensive elsewhere in this book, confronts these questions directly. Indeed, the authors of Volume 3 at the very least do not contend that German cities were "open" and "undefended"; their discussion of Luftwaffe defensive measures is admirably



thorough, and heavy Canadian aircrew losses are a testimony to the effectiveness of the German air defence system.

In the concluding pages of the Bomber War section, the authors quote from an editorial of the *Globe & Mail* of 23 March 1945 (p.864). The editorial, after asserting that the bomber offensive had crippled the German economy, contended that "the real victory of Allied air power" was "a thing of the mind—a lesson so terrible as never to be forgotten. . . . The German people will not need the presence of Allied armies to persuade them that they lost this war. The storm which is sweeping them from the air. . . . is convincing them that they have suffered the most terrible defeat ever inflicted on a people in all history." Out of this, the *Globe* hoped, would come a resolve by the people of Germany to live "constructively and compatibly alongside [their] neighbours."

The comment by the authors of this official history is deeply revealing of their interpretive position. "If that were the case," they wrote, "then the long casualty lists the *Globe* had published over the last five years would have some meaning." The whole thrust of Volume 3 of the official history is that the bomber offensive was a misguided failure, and that the deaths of 9,919 Canadians in Bomber Command were essentially meaningless in the total picture of the war.

But surely the *Globe* editorial was fundamentally correct. No event other than the final surge of the Red Army into Berlin brought the war home more crushingly to the German people than the long-sustained bomber offensive with its terrible casualties and immense damage. They knew, and their postwar, post-Nazi leaders knew, that Germany could not suffer another war as terrible as the Second World War and the German state would have to take a new path. Out of this realization came the Schuman Plan of 1950, the European Economic Community of 1957 and the European Community of today. Out of it also came the emergence of a democratic and responsible Germany in full partnership and alliance with the states that once had bombed it.

This excerpt from The Valour and the Horror Revisited, edited by Bercuson and Wise, has been reprinted with the permission of McGill-Queen's University Press.

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